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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Statement submitted by Coalition against Trafficking in Women, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd and UNAMINA International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

We NGOs work to protect the human rights of women and girls, specifically by attempting to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence, from rape, prostitution, and sexual harassment, to battering, female genital mutilation, and femicide. Systematic and systemic, violence against women and girls in all of its manifestations is devastating to their right to enjoy fundamental human rights, especially the right to life, liberty, and security of their persons and the right to equality.

Too often women first experience gender-based violence while still girl children, deprived of the protection and support all children need for healthy and full development, because their mothers have themselves been subjected to grievous forms of gender-based violence and other forms of gender discrimination. Harvard University psychiatrist Dr. Judith Lewis Herman, found that girls are especially at risk of incest when their abusive fathers and stepfathers disempower and devalue their mothers. [i] We NGOs emphasize that the goal of this 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women — ending all forms of gender-based violence against the girl child — can only be achieved by ending the gender-based violence, exploitation, and discrimination that is directed against all women.

Domestic Violence and the Girl Child

Experts estimate that between 1 out of 2 and 1 out of 3 women, around the world, endure battering by an intimate partner.[ii] Slightly more than 50 percent of female victims of intimate violence live in households with children under age twelve.[iii] Men who batter their wives and girlfriends are far more likely than non-abusive men to abuse their children. In over half of all domestic violence situations, the children are also physically abused.[iv] Children can witness violent situations by seeing an incident, or by hearing their mother's screams and crying, abuser's threats, sounds of fists hitting flesh, glass breaking, wood splintering, cursing and degrading language. [v]

Girl children who helplessly witness the battering of their mothers and/or who suffer abuse themselves from battering husband and fathers not only frequently suffer trauma and depression; they learn terrifying lessons about what it means to be a woman, lessons that leave them in fear and resign them to a life of violence and denigration. Because use and abuse of children is one of the chief strategies of power and control to which abusive husbands and fathers frequently resort, girl children of battering fathers and abused mothers may be abducted from their mothers by their fathers, may be the subject of retaliatory custody battles initiated by their fathers against their mothers, and/or may grow up listening to their fathers vilify and disparage their mothers. Exposure to domestic violence primes girl children, often from infancy, for a life of gender-based subordination and violence.

FGM and the Girl Child

FGM is a practice of violence against girl children, and the adult women they become, that exists to maintain and reinforce the power of men over women. It is frequently performed by women for whom it is their only source of livelihood at the request of female family members, who believe that if they are not subjected to it, their girl children will be unmarriageable and cast out. A recent study

estimates that over 130 million girls and women have undergone FGM and at least 2 million per year are expected to go through it. [vi] In 1993 a study conducted in Kenya showed that a strong majority of young, unmarried men said they would not marry uncircumcised women because he believed women who were not subjected to FGM would be less obedient wives, promiscuous, tend to seek divorce and, overall, be more in independent. The concerns of men reveal that "the control of female sexuality remains the fundamental rationale underlying the practice of FGM."[vii] FGM is now appearing in Europe, the United States of America, and the Scandinavian countries. Health authorities report that in Italy alone 45, 000 women and girls of Africa origin are coerced and pressured to undergo the practice. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that more than 150, 000 woman and girls have already been cut or are at risk.[viii]

FGM is an excruciatingly painful and dangerous act of gender-based violence that guarantees men that the women and girls in their families and societies will never fully experience the pleasure of their own bodies. The process of undergoing FGM can also increase risk of HIV exposure, as well as producing harmful physical and psychological effects that will last a lifetime. If the FGM procedure does not end in death for the girl, she most will likely experience pain and suffering during the uniquely female experiences of their lives: menstruation, sexual relations, and childbirth. According to the personal stories of thousands of women, their experiences of menstruation, sex, and childbirth are imbibed with feelings of fear, pain, worry and even physical struggle with her husband to prevent painful intercourse.

FGM teaches the girl child that women are abusive and untrustworthy and female genitals are a lifelong wound.

Child Marriage and the Girl Child

Child Marriage is the largest form of socially and morally sanctioned child sexual abuse. A UNICEF study estimated in 2004 that within the next decade, more than 100 million girls in the developing world would marry before the age of 18.[ix] But, according to the UN, girls do not reach the age of adulthood until 18, before which time they are not considered physically, physiologically, or psychologically ready for the burdens of marriage, sex, and childbearing. Because children cannot consent to sexual activities with adults, the sexual acts imposed on child wives are, by definition, rape.

Girls still have across cultures and continents, low cultural value in comparison to that of boys thus limited social support networks. Because child wives are economically dependent, have limited mobility, and are less able to negotiate, child marriages tend to have more instances of domestic violence. Child wives are murdered 3 times more frequently than adult wives. A World Health Organization study reported that in urban Bangladesh, 48 percent of girls 15-19 years old reported physical or sexual violence her husband, versus 10 percent of 45-49 year olds. In Peru, the percentages were 41 percent and 8 percent, respectively.[x]

Health risks for child wives are numerous. Pregnancy related deaths are the leading cause of mortality in girls 15-19 years old. Girls under 15 are 5 times more likely to die due to childbirth complications than those women over 20.[xi] Child brides also have higher rates of HIV infection. The Population Council confirms that the increased exposure to unprotected sex at a young age is actually a significant contributor to the epidemic. Child marriage is also linked with higher rates of FGM, as it is often seen as a prerequisite for marriage. Young mothers are unlikely to receive an education, and the children of uneducated mothers are also less likely to be educated.

The widespread child sexual exploitation that is accepted under the word "marriage" indicates the continual, omnipresent belief among countries and cultures that girl children are regarded as things to be owned and used.

Sexual Abuse and Exploitation and the Girl Child

Research indicates that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys will be sexually victimized before adulthood.[xii] 63 percent of all sexual assaults reported to police involve girls under 18 and UN agencies estimate that there are at least 1 to 2 million children, aged 5 to 15, most of them girls, who are led into the commercial sex industry each year. Trafficking, prostitution and pornography are child sexual abuse and exploitation. According to a UNICEF report, 30 to 35 per cent of all female prostitutes in the Mekong sub-region of Southeast Asia are between 12 and 17 years of age, there are more than 16,000 children engaged in prostitution in Mexico, and in Lithuania, 20 to 50 percent of prostitutes are believed to be minors, some as young as 11 years old. These girls are reduced to commodities, sold by traffickers and pimps to be raped repeatedly by "paying customers."

Between 1996 and 2004, the number of child pornography cases handled by the FBI's cyber-crime investigators increased 23 fold. More than 80, 000 reports of Internet-related child pornography were made to CyberTipline.[xiii] This is up from 750 percent in 5 years.[xiv] Pimps, traffickers, pornographers, and pedophiles frequently use pornography to "groom" children for prostitution and sexual abuse by repeatedly subjecting them to pornographic images.

The deleterious impact of sexual abuse, prostitution, and pornography on the health and human rights of girls around the world is enormous. Victims of prostitution often suffer severe health consequences from injuries inflicted by beatings, rapes, and unwanted sex. According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the long-term effects of sexual abuse and exploitation, including pornography and nude photographing childhood can include: PTSD and/or anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide, sexual anxiety and disorders, poor body image and low self-esteem, and unhealthy, self-destructive behaviors, such as alcohol and drug abuse, self-mutilation, or bingeing and purging to help mask painful emotions related to the abuse. Girls suffering from these severe and often long-term health problems are prevented from obtaining and advancing their human rights.

Legalization of prostitution and pornography for adult women lowers the standards for women's and girl's humanity to that of a commodity or thing. It gives men moral and social permission to use

and abuse women and girls. Acceptance of sexual exploitation, prostitution, and pornography normalizes women's and girls' humiliation, subordination, and pain.

Recommendations

We urge policy and action in the following areas:

- Increase awareness of women's rights, human rights and the grievous harms of domestic violence, rape, FGM, sexual abuse and exploitation including the use and making of child pornography through community-based trainings as well as training for key government officials, judiciary, law enforcement officers, and policy makers at all levels;
- Affect social norms through advocacy and education in the community.
- Disclosing false beliefs about FGM through advocacy and education; Cut women are not infertile, and experience fewer labor complications; FGM is not a prerequisite for marriage, and girls who are not subjected to FGM come to marriage and sexual relations as equals.
- Support health professionals to promote anti-child marriage, FGM, and sexual exploitation messages and help them mobilize at community level.
- Provide support for economic and livelihood opportunities for girls and young women.
- Elimination by governments of structural factors that push women and girls into prostitution, pornography, and trafficking such as poverty, systematic violence against women and girls, gender discrimination, and other forms of discrimination such as racism;
- Develop and promote of effective laws against domestic violence, FGM, child marriages, rape and trafficking, prostitution, sex tourism and related forms of sexual exploitation, including provisions criminalizing the demand for trafficking and prostitution;
- Enforce effective monitoring and prosecution of the sellers and buyers of sexual exploitation of the girl-child via the Internet and other media;

Note

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[i] Herman, Judith Lewis, Dr. Father-Daughter Incest. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 2000.

[ii] Heise, L., Ellsberg, M. and Gottemoeller, M. Ending Violence Against Women. Population Reports, Series L, No. 11., December 1999.

[iii] U.S. Department of Justice, Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends, March 1998.

[iv] National Domestic Violence Media Campaign, 1995.

[v] National Center on Women and Family Law, The Effects of Woman Abuse on Children, 1990
[vi] Abusgaraf, Rogaia Mustafa, ed. Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2006, page 3.
[vii] Ibid, 99.
[viii] Ibid
[ix] "Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action." The International Planned Parenthood Federation: London, 2006.
[x] Ibid.
[xi] Ibid.
[xii] Finkelhor, D. "Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse." The Future of Children: Sexual Abuse of Children, 1994, volume 4, page 37.
[xiii] Paul, Pamela. Pornified. Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2005.
[xiv] Ibid.